

Manifestations of Social Realism Across Diverse Forms of Pakistani Art

Munazzah Akhtar*, Sarah Javed Shah, Rabia Ahmed Qureshi

Department of Architecture, University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore

* **Corresponding Author:** Email: munazzaha@gmail.com

Abstract

Social Realism, an artistic movement introduced in the second quarter of the twentieth century, influenced an entire generation of artists all over the world. It explores the themes ranging from poverty to anti-state demonstrations, and from depictions against imperialism to class inequality, gender oppression and social injustice. Elements of social realism are not surprising to encounter in the Pakistani art world, considering the ideals of the style and the turbulent history of the country since its independence in 1947. Pakistani artists have always been sensitive to the social and political issues of the country, which have somewhat become fragments of its identity, especially as ascertained by the Western gaze. Women's persecution and social exclusion is one such subject that has become an identifier for Pakistan, although a human development report of the United Nations recognizes the country having better gender equality than neighboring India. Nevertheless, women oppression is also a theme that has often been explored by the profound Pakistani artists, using diverse approaches and media. The aim of this paper is to show how artistic works produced by different Pakistani artists are sometimes metaphorically, formalistically and symbolically connected in their concepts, drawing on the social realistic subject of gender oppression.

The paper begins with briefly introducing the contemporary art of Pakistan and its diverse focuses. Subsequently, it juxtaposes two artistic works, produced decades apart and apparently using disparate forms: poetry and visual art. The poem titled "Merey Dard kō Jō Zubān Miley" (1972) by Modern revolutionary poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (d. 1984), and the digital art series titled "The Veil" (2004) by contemporary artist Rashid Rana (b. 1968), are compared for this purpose. The objective is to demonstrate that although both these works appear distinct, in time and nature, yet they are covertly united in their Social Realistic theme of personifying subjugated women, as well as in their conceptual frameworks. The paper follows the methodology of formally analyzing both works; deconstructing their structures, meanings and connotations, and ultimately establishing an ekphrastic relationship between the two.

Key Words: Social realism, Urdu poetry, Contemporary visual arts, Ekphrasis, Gender oppression, Inequality

1. Background

Poetry is one of the most widely read literary art in Pakistan. The tradition of poetry in the region is centuries old, practiced since the 13th century. It was largely promoted, in Persian, by the Mughal courts and Sufi saints^a from 16th century onwards. Persian poetry remained a part of the literary vehicles even after Independence. However, Urdu being declared as the national language of Pakistan, is now the premier language

of poetry, specifically since the Modern era. The traditional gatherings for the recitations of poetry, called *mushā'ira*, still frequently take place in different parts of the country. Similar to poetry, the roots of Modern visual art of Pakistan also trace back to the Mughal courts of India. Modern artists have focused on experimenting with the indigenous art traditions of the region, since before Independence in the early 20th century. The artists, who moved to Pakistan after 1947, blended the notions of Islamic calligraphy, geometry and miniature paintings of Mughal era with the Modern principles to create an artistic identity exclusively for Pakistan. To promote the status of art in the society, Government of Pakistan has been conferring National Awards to selected artists, annually, in recognition of their works. The visual artists, have also conversely, suffered

^a Sufism is the mystical dimension in Islam and Sufi saints are considered to be the spiritual leaders of Islam. The Arabic term for Sufi saint is *walī*; however, it should not be confused with the Christian tradition of sainthood. In Sufism, the *walis*/ saints are considered masters in the art of spiritual purification and denote ones vested with the "authority of God."

greatly at the hands of state-censorship policies, more so during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq from 1977 to 1988. During this period, many Pakistani Modern artists were banned from state-sponsored exhibitions, because their art works addressed issues such as military dictatorship, political oppression, religious fundamentalism and suppression of women; problems that were present in the society but were not often mentioned in the media or on public forums [1]. Today, however, the visual artists enjoy a far better status and freedom of expression than they did before. Among both of these art forms, Urdu poetry is more accessible to the public in Pakistan. As visual artworks are mostly exhibited in private exhibitions and art galleries in the country or abroad, thus reaching far less people. Urdu poetry, on the other hand, in *mushā'ira/s*, often telecasted on media, is presented to a larger audience. In addition, selected Urdu poems are mandatory to read and analyze as part of secondary education curriculum - a reason how we became familiar with several great works and developed interest in Urdu poetry.

This research has begun with two theoretical notions: one that some kind of a sporadic relationship has existed between poetry and art of South Asia, and the other that the subjects of many Pakistani art works, including poetry, have been archetypical Social Realist. The style in art called "Social Realism" started in the United States in the 1930s but due to its ideological concepts, being so true to the realities of life, became widely successful in the rest of the world [2]. Social Realism, however related is not to be confused with "Socialist Realism", which is also a style of realistic art, developed in the Soviet Union and became a popular style in other socialist and communist countries, for example, People's Republic of China. As opposed to the ideology of Social Realism, which takes as its main theme significant and dramatic moments in the lives of ordinary people or working classes [2], Socialist Realism represents the political and social views of the ruling class and government. That is, the difference between the two is not stylistic or formal but in fact, of the patrons of art and the agency of artists [3].

2. Interactions between Visual Art, Poetry and Beyond

The affiliation between poetry and visual arts is a longstanding tradition, familiar to various cultures throughout human history. Artists have either used paintings to visualize the poems or have used texts and poetry to signify the ideas

behind the visual art. For example, traditional Japanese art works called *Haiga*, common in the Edo period (early 17th to mid-19th century), were typically composed of a painting on simple subjects of everyday life and often accompanied by a poem^b. The Greek poet Simonides (556-468 BC) described this relationship as, "Painting is silent poetry and poetry a speaking picture."^c

The association of verbal and visual arts has been a point of deep consideration for the artists of historic South Asia as well, who have produced illustrated manuscripts since the mid-16th century. Traditional miniature paintings, starting as early as the tenth century in Persia, depicted dramatic scenes on subjects related to the national epic poem *Shāhnāme*. Nasir-ud-Din Humayun (r. 1530-40; 1555-56), the second Mughal emperor of India, came across this Persian tradition during the period of his exile from India. He brought two accomplished Persian artists to the Indian Mughal court and commissioned several miniature paintings [4]. Later Mughal artists further refined this tradition with the use of opaque watercolor, gold and ink on *waṣṭī*.^d Mughal miniature paintings were usually commissioned, either as illustrations for books or as individual works, to become a part of imperial albums known as *muraqqa*, composed of calligraphic text along with paintings. The subjects of these paintings ranged from portraits of royalties and elites to depicting scenes of war, nature and imperial courts, often using texts and poetic verses to elucidate artists' concepts (Fig. 1).

The founding of British rule in India in the 18th century led to the decline of Mughal traditions. The Indian painters of 19th century favored European styles over traditional, which further aggravated the devolution of illustrated

^b *Haiga: Takebe Sōchō and the Haiku-Painting Tradition*, March 3 – April 16, 1995, Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond Museums. Richmond, Virginia: University of Richmond Museums, 1995. Exhibition Brochure. These ateliers kept the style of miniature painting alive until the Mayo School of Art, later National College of Arts (NCA), was set up in Lahore by the British government in 1875.

^c This aphorism is attributed to Simonides by Plutarch in his book *De Gloria Atheniensium*, vol III.

^d *Waṣṭī* or *vaṣṭī* is a type of handmade paper used specifically in Mughal India for miniature paintings. It has an archival quality due to which Mughal paintings have survived over time.

manuscript style. Iftikhar Dadi, however, talks about painting ateliers in Lahore, which were established during Mughal period and survived the Colonial phase [5].

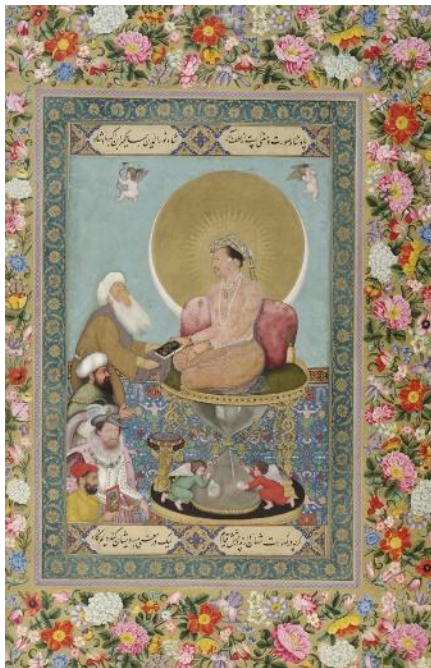


Fig. 1: Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings [6]

The purpose of Mayo School of Art was to revive the traditional arts of India. Abdur Rehman Chughtai (d. 1975) became the first Indian Muslim artist to practically revitalize the lost tradition of miniature painting. Chughtai joined the Mayo School of Art, first as a student in 1911 and later as an instructor of chromolithography. After the Independence of Pakistan, Chughtai became a significant artist to represent the new state of Pakistan. He was not only a painter but also an intellectual who was well versed in Urdu and Persian literature and poetry. He worked to establish an indigenous identity for the art in Pakistan by rejecting the British aesthetic hegemony. Chughtai became increasingly interested in Mughal aesthetics and created his unique style influenced by Mughal miniature and Islamic art traditions. His *Muraqq'a-i-Chughtā'i* [7], the most significant published work produced during his long career, is an illustrated version of the Urdu poetry collection, *Divān*, of widely celebrated eighteenth-century poet Mirza Ghalib (d. 1869)^e. Chughtai transformed the *muraqq'ain*

^e Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan, born in 1797 and died in 1869, was a classical Urdu and Persian poet from the court of the last Mughal Emperor. His poetry is considered the masterpieces of Urdu *ghazal* (lyric

the age of mechanical reproduction, enacting many technical and aesthetic alterations [8].



Fig. 2: Bolke lab azad hain tere [9]

Renowned Pakistani calligrapher and figurative artist Sadequain (d. 1987) also had a similar artistic relation to the classical Urdu literature, specifically with the poetry of Mirza Ghalib, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) and Faiz Ahmed Faiz (d. 1984). Sadequain was a Social Realist and defined himself as a “speaker of truth,” a quality associated with Iqbal and Faiz as well [10]. Sadequain’s painting on the subject of revolutionary verses by Faiz, “*Bōl kay lab azād hain terey*” (Speak! as your lips are free), is a perfect example of, yet a different set of, relationship between visual art and poetry (Fig.2).

Historically, the Mughal miniature paintings, which are small-scaled opaque watercolor artworks, were often accompanied by poetic verses, calligraphy or written text. These paintings require skills to apply very minute strokes of colors using just the tip of the brush. These skills passed on from generation to generation, without any formal education. However, the formal study of miniature-painting tradition was established in Pakistan at the NCA in the 1960s. This program started on a smaller scale but in 1980s taking several steps forward, the first official miniature degree program was started to impart the techniques of Persian and Mughal style.

poetry). He is more commonly known by his pen-name Ghalib. For details see:K.C. Kanda, *Mirza Ghalib: Selected Lyrics and Letters*.

However, the students of NCA “began fracturing the traditional space and narratives of the Mughal miniature” [6] by the turn of the century, utilizing the traditional characteristics of the miniature art not as a common theme but as a common point of departure. In the first decade of the 21st century, contemporary Pakistani miniature artists work with a variety of media from *waṣḥī* to aluminum and from watercolors to digital printing. Asia House exhibited such diverse miniature art works by eight contemporary Pakistani artists, including Rashid Rana, at Manchester Art Gallery in 2007. The exhibition titled “*Beyond the page: Contemporary art from Pakistan*” marked the recycling and re-contextualizing of traditional ideas and promoted the somewhat hybrid and cosmopolitan edition of miniature/visual art, interacting not just with poetry, but also with a variety of other media as well [11].

3. Social Realism, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Contemporary Visual Artists

Social Realism, which as an art school can be dated to 1930s, influenced an entire generation of Modern artists all over the world and not just those whose works were politically or socially oriented. The themes explored by the Social Realists range from poverty to street demonstrations and from representations against imperialism to class inequality, social injustice and oppression. Thus, art of Social Realism, in other words, sometimes has activist and political agendas but broadly depicts social concerns and the artists associated with it usually aim to use art as a weapon, as they believe that “art could communicate ideas, change thinking, and free the imagination in ways that would benefit mankind” [2]. Natural disasters, poverty, political instability, socio-political injustice and social as well as gender oppression are few of the persistent problems Pakistan has been facing for the last seven decades. Considering these social injustices, it is not surprising that elements of Social Realism became conscious choice for subjects of some modern and contemporary art of Pakistan. Artists have held in them the potential to bring about extensive changes within a society. It had already become apparent during the struggle for independence in 1930s and 40s, when poets like Muhammad Iqbal and writers like Sayyed Sajjad Zaheer (d. 1973) played an important role in the revolution. It is perhaps for their potential that both the despot and the fanatic fear artists and poets. Shapiro identifies Social Realists by defining their work as being “a consistent commitment to art as both the expression of their personal response to experience, and as a vehicle

for the expression of their social values” [2]. By this definition, one can easily classify Modern poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) as a true Social Realist and one of the most important voices in the literary art world of Pakistan. An avowed communist and Marxist, Faiz is a poet whose works have the ability to unleash the power of imagination and motivate revolutions [12]. Starting in the 1943, his works became a medium for expressing inconvenient truths about the oppressed and the suppressed in the society. He was a committed poet who regarded poetry as a tool for social change - a mallet with which society can be transformed. The overpowering humanism and sweet lyricism of his verse have made him the foremost and by far the most admired figure in Modern Urdu poetry [13].

Faiz’s life was full of turbulent events. He was condemned many times for freely speaking about his thoughts. Faiz also served as a cultural advisor to Pakistan’s Ministry of Education; he created the Pakistan National Art Council as well as the *Lok Virsa*, the Institute of Folk Heritage. Faiz felt that folk art was an inexhaustible source of inspiration for writers and poets, as well as for the general population. Faiz’s poetry played a very active role in fighting against social injustices and oppressions during the “Modern” era and he was imprisoned several times due to his revolutionary literary activities. Coppola’s comment that Faiz was “a spokesperson for the world’s voiceless and suffering people whether Indians oppressed by the British in the ‘40s, freedom fighters in Africa, the Rosenbergs during the Cold War America in the ‘50s, Vietnamese peasants fleeing American napalm in the ‘60s, or Palestinian children in the 1970s” [14], grants Faiz a global status. Even though he remained politically a controversial figure during his lifetime, through his meaningful poetry, “he transcended time, he became eternal and he became immortal” [15].

Similar to Faiz’s Modern poems, works of several contemporary visual artists are either silent demands for justice or reveal an aspect of the misery and plight of the oppressed classes. To name a few, artists as diverse as Shazia Sikandar, Imran Qureshi, Huma Mulji, Anwar Saeed, Hamra Abbas, Saira Wasim and Rashid Rana have ensured an ongoing debate over several social issues through their works. For example, an exhibition titled, “*Playing with the Loaded Gun: Contemporary Art in Pakistan*”, held at Apexart, New York in September 2003, featured works of eight contemporary artists from Pakistan. The works of these artists examined the social concerns in Pakistan and brought attention to

issues such as domestic violence, honor killings, nuclearization of Pakistan, Western influences on Pakistani culture, and suicide bombings. This exhibition is one of many that has addressed similar agendas. Without going in too much detail, the thematic and formalistic approaches of only some mentioned above has been elaborated in this article. Huma Mulji (b. 1970) is a sculptor and visual installation artist, who prominently incorporates taxidermy animals in her works. On several occasions, she has used water buffalo and camels, placed in unnatural positions and context to symbolize the dilemma of the demoralized groups of the nation in the wake of urbanization. On the other hand, art by Imran Qureshi (b. 1972) reflects many directions and angles of contemporary miniature art. One of his most critically acclaimed works, the “*Moderate Enlightenment*” series (2006-09), recalls the Mughal miniature traditions where the figures are depicted in idyllic pastoral surroundings or in minimalist landscape backgrounds of color, both emphasizing a peaceful environmental context. It is the physiognomy and attire of the subjects that create controversy and tension for the viewers [16]. For example, a person with a beard and cap at first glance seems like a religiously conservative figure but, on second glance, is found to be carrying out activities of modern-day life like weightlifting, carrying a briefcase and wearing shorts or fashionable camouflaged socks (Fig. 3). Members of Pakistani society may view all these activities in a variety of ways. In these pieces, Qureshi is implying that with the ongoing tensions between the religious fundamentalists of the country and the west, these figures could imply “threatening gestures instead of a fashion statement” for some groups of the society [16].

If Imran Qureshi is moderately experimenting with the miniature technique, his fellow NCA graduate Rashid Rana (b. 1968) broke all boundaries of trialing and gave a new meaning to the art of miniature. It is his work that the following section focuses on, formally comparing it with an Urdu poem by Faiz, in relation to metaphors, messages and form. Rana’s inspirations from traditional arts of Pakistan and his choices in subjects and formal presentation of his artworks, instantly connects his works with the thoughts of Faiz Ahmed.

4. Rashid Rana: Transforming the Traditional Art

Adopting the structural frameworks of the Mughal miniature paintings and tile-mosaic work, called *kāshikārī*, Rana uses them in radically

different ways and mediums. He is indeed the voice of the new generation and by far one of the most successful contemporary artists representing his multi-faceted country on many fronts. His works float between the notions of microcosm and macrocosm, paint on canvas and digital photomontage, tradition and innovation and from being analogous to being exclusive. Trained as a traditional miniature artist at NCA and exposed to the Western art later during his graduate studies in USA and Europe, Rana is now usually referred to as a “media artist”. As the late 20th and early 21st century was a time of miniature revivalism in Pakistan, Rana, responding to this trend, realized that only miniaturist quality would make his work recognizable and regarded as Pakistani [17]. He struggled to create an innovative and unique style, which was at the same time deeply rooted in the art traditions of the country.



Fig. 3: Moderate Enlightenment [18]

Rana’s earliest digital work “*I love miniature*” (2002) was a shift from a traditional style to his contemporary version of miniature art, which utilized macro and micro level digital imaging to represent “a journey of paradoxes and dealings with duality” [19]. *I love miniature* is a portrait of Nur-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir (r. 1605-27), the fourth Mughal emperor (Fig. 4). On the surface it is ethnically and traditionally well-rooted, but if observed closely, one discovers that it is made up of mini photo images of billboards used all over the city of Lahore. Using contradicting and contrasting subjects on the micro and macro levels of his works, Rana started using

tiny photographs to make up large digital collages mounted over acrylic glass. Rana's use of ideas inspired by miniature paintings and *kāshīkāri* tile or mirror-mosaic work from Mughal architecture of Lahore is evident from his photomontage art technique. Miniature paintings utilize very minute brush strokes to make the whole painting, while *kāshīkāri* makes use of small pieces of ceramic tiles or mirror to create patterns or designs over walls. Rana's play with pixelation depicts these two techniques in a similar yet contrasting way. His technique, which was novel for the Pakistani art circle in 2002, is now Rana's trademark style and has been given diverse titles such as "pixelated collage" (Kavita Singh; 2010), "digital/photographic mosaic" and "photo-tiling" (Adnan Madan; 2010) [20]. Commenting on Rana's cutting-edge works, Quddus Mirza writes that "Paradox appears in the work of Rashid Rana on many levels - as a formal device, a conceptual twist and an aesthetic strategy" [20]. Rashid Rana's artworks, using paradoxical techniques and materials, draw attention to and pose questions related to a variety of subjects, for example, political, apolitical, urban and social. Thus, Rana's unique work makes him an ideal choice to represent the contemporary visual art of Pakistan.

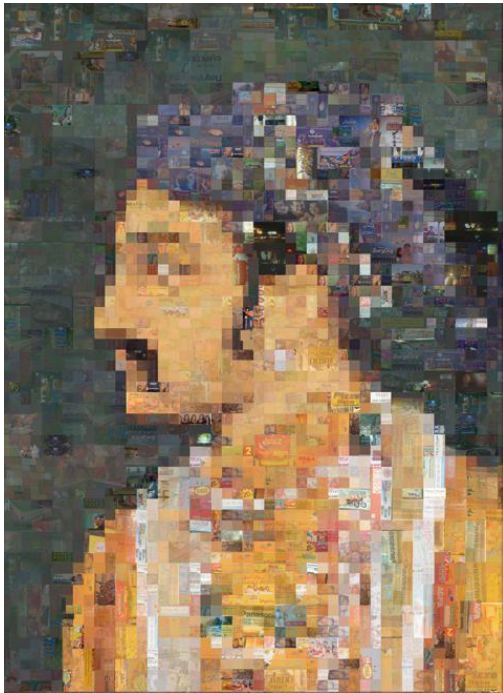


Fig. 4: I Love Miniature [21]

5. Two Voices, One Idea: Faiz's *Dard* and Rana's *Veil*

Max Black proposed that the use of metaphors constitute similarities between two

otherwise different fields of endeavor [22]. To support our goal to compare disparate arts in Pakistan, an Urdu poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and a digital art series by Rashid Rana has been studied in detail. Both of these are two completely different set of artworks, greatly separated by their media of expression, time frame, attitude and implied notions, but if reviewed closely, they represent formalistic, aesthetic, thematic and conceptual similarities. Urdu literary legend Faiz Ahmed Faiz is regarded in many ways as a dreamer of humanistic ideals but at the same time a firm and uncompromising revolutionary who expressed his views with conviction and powerful expressions. He strongly believed that "humanity has never accepted defeat against its enemies and will be victorious in the end. And war, hate, oppression and prejudice shall one day be replaced by what Hafiz, the great Persian poet, proclaimed love as the ultimate and immaculate basis of human relationships" [23].

مرا درد ہے نعمتِ بے صدا
 مری ذات ذرّہ بے نشان
 مرے درد کو جو زباں ملے
 مجھے اپنا نام و نشان ملے
 مری ذات کا جو نشان ملے
 مجھے رازِ نظمِ جہاں ملے
 جو مجھے یہ رازِ نہاں ملے
 مری خامشی کو بیاں ملے
 مجھے کائنات کی سروری
 مجھے دولتِ دو جہاں ملے

His poems are translated into various languages for a wide global readership, who felt an intellectual affinity with Faiz across cultural and geographical boundaries. Faiz saw himself and other poets as "warriors, the riders of dawn," who wrote to give people hope in difficult times when there is none [24]— an idea which became the conceptual basis for many of Faiz's poems including "*Meray Dard ko Jō Zubān Miley*" (if my pain could find words), published in 1978 [25].

This poem, one of the most heart-rending and influential poems by Faiz, consisting of five *ash'ār* (couplets). The theme of each couplet is interlinked by the conceptual idea behind the poem but at the same time also seems complete, if reviewed individually. First, the poem is translated

word by word and later analyzed, to discover its conceptual framework and messages. In the first couplet, that is the strophe^f of the poem, Faiz states, "My pain is a voiceless song and my existence is void of name and identity." In the second couplet, Faiz makes a rhetorical curve and says, "if (however) my pain could find a voice, I would find my name and identity." The next two couplets continue with the same theme stating: "If (by some means) my existence gets identity, I would find the secret to the patterns of the universe" and "if I could unfold this hidden secret, my silence will get its narrative." The poem climaxes with the thought: "(if somehow all this happens) I will get lordship to the universe and eventually, I will find the treasures of both worlds."

The poem is short in length but deep in meaning and follows a rhyming scheme after the first couplet. The word "miley" (lit. to get or to find) is used for this rhythm, which is only momentarily disturbed in the last couplet. *Ghazal*^g in Urdu poetry is understood as a lyric genre, typically expressing personal and emotional feelings, often associated with the pain of loss or separation and the magnificence of love in spite of the pain. According to this definition, poem *Dard* is structured in the form of classical Urdu *ghazal*, with each line sharing the same meter. This poem has three formal sections. The first section consists of just the first couplets, the second section is a grouping of the next three couplets and the third holds the last couplet. In this way, the poem is similar to the ancient Greek tragic poetry with a strophe (first part), antistrophe (middle part) and epode (end part). The first syntactic section holds the first couplet while the second section consists of the rest of the poem. The first couplet employs the present tense while after that, Faiz makes a shift in the tenses and the rest of the poem uses future tense, which divides the poem grammatically into two sections as well. Urdu syntax and vocabulary are based on a four-tiered system of politeness, known as *adāb*. Due to its emphasis on politeness and decorum, Urdu is taken as the most refined and elevated language among all South Asian languages. Faiz has used a formal language style in this poem but without

^f Astrophe is a poetic term referring to the first part in ancient Greek tragic poetry. It was usually followed by the antistrophe (middle part) and epode (end part).

^g *Ghazal* is a very common poetic form in Urdu literature consisting of rhyming couplets with each line sharing almost the same meter or length.

being extremely polite. The syntax of the poem is simple in some lines while hyperbata^h are used on several occasions to put emphasis on the feelings of the narrator. For example, the word "jō" (lit. if) signifies this wherever used in the poem.

The poem is set in a harsh realistic environment without being linked to any specific time or place. The poem revolves around just one character, who is an implicit narrator, addressing an implied reader. The theme of the poem is indirectly stated in the present circumstances of the narrator and his wishful thinking, which is evident in the later part. The theme metaphorically points towards the problematic character of the society, representing the voice of the oppressed nation and its people. Reading the pathos of this poem it becomes clear that Faiz is talking on behalf of a demoralized person, a person in pain who at first believes that he/she is so insignificant that his/her existence has no value and no identity in this world. He/she believes that there is no one to see his/her sufferings and to listen to his/her painful thoughts. In the second section, the same person shows some sign of hope when he/she says that if by any chance, his sufferings are heard, or the men in power realize his pain - then he/she would no longer remain an insignificant being. The narrator dreams on that if he/she somehow becomes a significant part of the society and gets an identity; it would be comparable to finding something extraordinary, for example, like the truth about the realities of this universe. For the narrator of the poem, getting an identity for his/her otherwise meaningless being will get him/herself a voice to speak against his/her sufferings. In the end, the narrator implies that finding a voice to speak against injustice (for an oppressed nation in harsh political or social scenario) is like finding all the treasures the world, the universe and the heavens could offer. Although, it is written from a socio-political point of view, due to the open-endedness of the poem and its allegorical nature, one can identify it with any individual under depressing circumstances, ranging from social injustice, unemployment, social oppression, gender oppression and poverty.

In comparison with this Modern piece of poetry, the other artwork juxtaposed here is the *Veil* series by Rashid Rana. The visual representation and messages attached to the *Veil* series can immediately make one think of the

^h Hyperbata is plural of Hyperbaton, which is a figure of speech that uses disruption or inversion of natural and simple word order to produce a distinctive effect.

poem *Dard*, right at first glance. This connection is further deepened when both are placed side by side for scrutiny. Since his earlier work *I love miniature*, Rana had been revisiting and revising his conceptual framework and art techniques, which apparently matured immensely by 2006, when the *Veil* series was introduced. The *Veil* series is not a very popular work of Rana's in Pakistan, as many find its iconography to be offensive. The series seldom finds a place in Rana's conceptual works in any serious academic research in Pakistan. In the West, however, this series is frequently mentioned during interviews with the artist. It is a multi-part work of which three pieces: *Veil I, II* and *III* (Fig. 5), were exhibited at the show titled "*The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today*" at Saatchi Art Gallery, London in 2006. *Veil IV* was exhibited at the show "*The Politics of Fears*" at Albion Gallery, London in 2007. All pieces depict anonymous women with their bodies and faces deliberately hidden beneath the voluminous folds of the veil fabric. *Veil I, II* and *III* show singular women while *Veil IV* (Fig. 6) illustrates five women standing side-by-side in a row. All the pieces utilize chromogenic color printing mounted over Diasec, the acrylic glass used for face-mounting prints like photographs.



Fig. 5: Veil I, II & III [26]



Fig. 6: Veil IV [27]

Rana's pieces of *Veil* series seem to oscillate between the bigger image and the tiny images. Both are contextually related to one another, as both represent the female gender and issues associated with it. Looking at the pieces from a distance, one can instantly recognize the figures to be Muslim women covered from head to

toe in long veils but anything more is difficult to infer from formal analysis. The women are almost of the same height and physique. The colors of their veils are different shades of brown, minutely differing from one another. The background colors are light to compliment the foreground figures. The veils are without any pattern except for one woman whose veil has a slight floral pattern at the front but again not very significant. Thus, there is no means to characterize any woman in particular. As the themes of Rana's works are always two-fold, the fully clothed obscured women seen on a macro level, when observed closely on a micro level, become a mass of pixelated squares, illustrating blurred erotic stills of Western women, sourced from various websites. The identity of these Western women also seems suppressed due to the blurry effects and in most instances, their faces are hidden behind male body parts. These Western women are no more recognizable in these tiny images than the Muslim women are, hidden behind layers of clothing.

Pakistan is a multi-cultural and complex country where the status of women varies considerably across classes, regions, ethnic groups and the rural/urban divide caused by uneven socio-economic development. The tribal, feudal, and capitalist social formations all affect women's lives [28]. Pakistani women living in urban areas today enjoy freedom and a better status than most Muslim and many non-Muslim women in other parts of the world. Professional and educational opportunities have increased for women over the last two to three decades. According to a Human Development Report released by the United Nations in 2010, Pakistan has better gender equality than neighboring India [29].

The situation, however, is not uniform throughout the country. Incidents of gender oppression and domestic violence against women are often highlighted from time to time, in both urban and rural settings. Rana does not emphasize any class, region or ethnicity of the women in the *Veil* series. Yet, the specific type of veil garment that he appropriates is one of the many styles that are worn by women in Pakistan [30]. It is basically a one-piece loose-fitting dress, with a tightly fitting head piece. In this way the garment covers the entire body, including the eyes, which are veiled with a mesh-like weaving of the fabric. In Pakistan, women wear these veils out of tradition and cultural norms. As Rana himself elaborates: "due to lack of exposure to the Western culture, these men [of specific mindset] have a very promiscuous image of the Western women" [19]. In salaciously juxtaposing these two seemingly

opposing sets of images, Rana shows the two sides of the same coin, that is, the way ignorant men perceive women from both Eastern and Western cultures. Thus, the art works represent the metaphorical cries of oppression for both Eastern and Western women, on both macro and micro levels. Talking about his work in an interview for online magazine, Creative Times, Rana says, “my work could be categorized as being politically overt at times, but I cannot just say that I am only interested in political turbulence. I deal with all sorts of issues, mostly from my immediate surroundings; it is not so much about the issues as the ‘representations’ around those concerns that I am interested in. I do not intend to make political art, but I am interested in the politics of representation, and I hope my work transcends all the heterogeneous issues that I bring into it as triggering points” [31]. Therefore, Rashid Rana represents current issues within the Pakistani society, ranging from political to social concerns, in a manner that instead of demonstrating his objective opinions, he engages the audience in a dialogue over them. In the next part of this paper, an effort has been made to put together his *Veil* series and Faiz’s poem discussed above, and prove formalistic, thematic and ekphrastic relationships between them.

6. *Merey Dard Kō Jō Zubān Miley: An Ekphrasis to the Veil Series*

Ekphrasisⁱ is a practice in art defined as “verbal representation of visual representation” [32]. Ekphrasis, developed originally by Greeks, is writing descriptively, most often poetically or dramatically, about works of art [33]. An equivalent but reversal practice involving art built around poetry, had also existed and still practiced in different cultures and parts of the world (some of such artworks, which are a conscious response to specific poems, have been mentioned earlier). This conceptual practice has helped us to provide a name to the relationship established in this interdisciplinary art-based research.

Faiz’s poetry makes great use of symbols through allusion, which make metaphors come alive in many instances. *Merey Dard kō Jō Zubān*

Miley dramatically associates pain with singing and a victim with a particle - a particle which has no existence. Lessing argues that “painting is a synchronic, visual phenomenon, one of space that is immediately in its entirety understood and appreciated, while poetry (again, in its widest sense) is a diachronic art of the ear, one that depends on time to unfold itself for the reader’s appreciation” [34]. Thus, as the poem does not signify any specific time or place, nor does it specify the identity of the narrator; it can be interpreted in various ways. Although, most of Faiz’s poetry was written in the wakes of socio-political issues of the nation during Modern/Postmodern era, but in the existing circumstances, this poem is frequently associated with women suffering due to gender inequality or gender oppression in the Pakistani society. Two verses from the poem also became title for two very popular drama serials recently aired on national television channels^j. Both serials revolve around the experiences of women and ideas related to gender oppression, which is exactly the message behind the *Veil* series. The title of the poem *Merey Dard kō Jō Zubān Miley*, literally meaning “if my pain could find words”, if appended to the art series, will seem fit as the women indeed are in pain but unable to voice their sufferings. The mood of both artworks is similar, that is serious, and is consistent throughout. The poem consists of verses short in length, woven together to create the whole, also with the use of the word “miley” repeatedly, to maintain rhythm within the poem. *Veil* also utilizes very small pieces of images, very similar to one another in context, fused together to form a larger whole. *Dard*, however, is more metaphoric than *Veil*, as the poem uses tropes, which exaggerates the usual meaning of the verses. Faiz has used phrases such as “*naghma-e-beysadā*” (lit. voiceless song) and “*zarra-e-beynishān*” (lit. unidentifiable particle) to refer to the pain and being of the narrator. These metaphors juxtapose disparate entities to characterize the condition of the narrator, which is of oppression, and to intensify the depth of pity; an assumed audience can feel for him/her. *Veil* series, on the other hand, is more straightforward in its formalistic approach as it clearly shows the

ⁱ *Ekphrasis* lit. means to draw out or to make clear, in Greek language. Historically, ekphrasis has been primarily seen in poetic responses to visual art, for example, for the works of Homer, Shakespeare, Keats, Wordsworth, and others comparing art and poetry. This practice was also quite popular in medieval and early-modern Islamic art spheres, as seen in Mughal era art of India.

^j Drama serial “*Merī Zāt Zarra-i-Beynishān*” was aired on channel Geo TV in 2010. It is a story of an educated woman who greatly suffers in life at the hands of her own family. Drama serial “*Merey Dard kō Jō Zubān Miley*” was aired on Pakistani channel HUM TV in 2012. This serial also revolves around the lives of two sisters.

characters, giving distinct messages regarding their oppressed conditions through their visual representation. The later part of the poem verbally represents the wishful thinking of the Muslim and Western women in the *Veil* series, of becoming a significant part of the society, getting a distinctive identity for themselves and to raise a voice against their hardships. Thus, it is not paradoxical to say that *Dard* and *Veil* have an unintentional ekphrastic, formalistic and thematic relationship among them. The phenomenon of Social Realism exhibited in the intelligible meanings of both of these disparate art works also assert to the quote, "in his poetry there is painting, and in his painting, there is poetry" [35]. In this manner, the dramatic words of *Dard* can be analyzed as representing the voice of the veiled women and the stereotyped Western women, who are indicated as being devoid of their particular identities - the women waiting for their plights to be heard, the women waiting to be freed of these injustices.

7. Conclusion

Poetry and paintings (visual art), although seemingly disparate, have been regarded as "sister arts" by many artists and writers, across culture, place and time [36]. Mughal miniature paintings often had a dedicated area for poetic verses or calligraphic text underlining the theme of the painting. Later Modern and Postmodern artists of Pakistan also revived this practice along with the tradition of Mughal miniature art. Abdur Rehman Chughtai's miniature paintings on Mirza Ghalib's poetry and Sadequain's figurative art based on Faiz Ahmed Faiz's verses exemplify this trend. Contemporary artists of Pakistan have extensively experimented with the miniature art techniques and have developed a variety of new methods. At the same time, the contemporary artists have also observed to be closely associated to the ideas of "Social Realism". The art works categorized under Social Realism, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, present the thoughts and beliefs of the artists, literary and visual both, protesting sans violence and force against social injustice. Ideas of Social Realism are widely utilized by Pakistani artists, probing the held assumptions and perceptions associated with the society due to unchanging socio-political conditions of the country in the last seven decades. Gender oppression and inequality, specifically women's social exclusion in Pakistan was the subject highlighted, out of many others, in this paper. Rashid Rana's *Veil* series unintentionally visualizes the same concerns as voiced in Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem *Merey Dard kō Jō Zubān Miley*. The *Veil* series, which is an innovative form

of traditional art with its use of tiny photographic collage to form a bigger picture, represents the perception of women in specific areas of Pakistan. The thematic and formalistic approaches of Rana, in the series are similar to the poem *Dard*, if studied with reference to gender oppression. Therefore, the existence of ekphrastic, formalistic and thematic relationships between the two artworks cannot be negated.

The art of Pakistan has come a long way with the nation's contemporary artists being recognized and well regarded in international art circles. The contemporary artists, using art as means of expression and utilizing a variety of mediums and social subject matters, are compelling the world to look at Pakistan from a different angle. With the help of such artists and intellectuals, it is concluded with hope that not only Pakistan but also the whole world will find a way to become a better place, as hoped and expressed by Faiz in another evoking poem titled, *Hum dekhēn gay* (lit. we shall see), initially published under the title: *wa-yabqā wajh-o-rabbik* [37]:

We shall see

It is certain that we shall see

The day, which has already been promised

The day, recorded in the divine tablet

We shall see

When the mountains of cruelty and oppression

Will blow away like cotton wool

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